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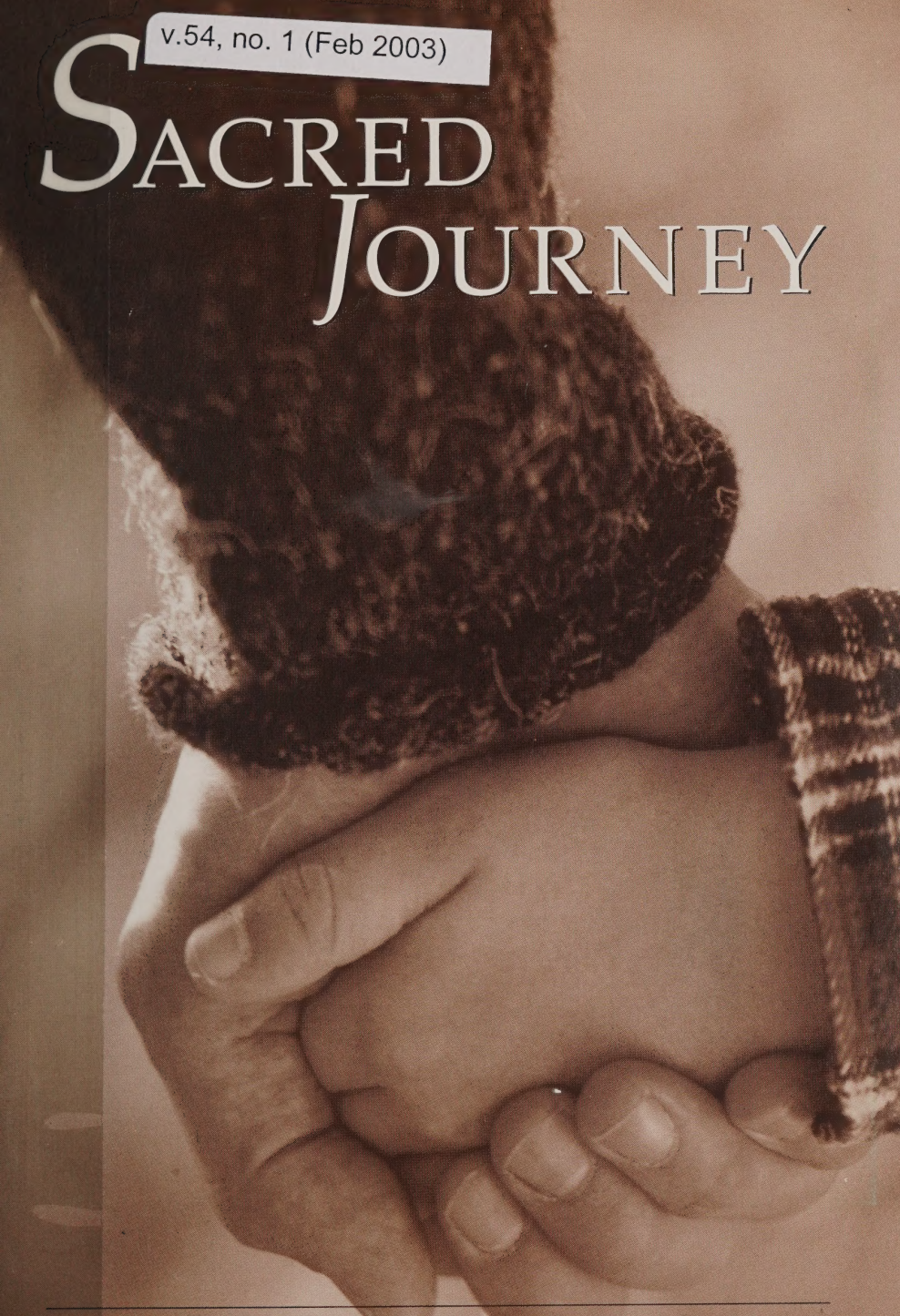

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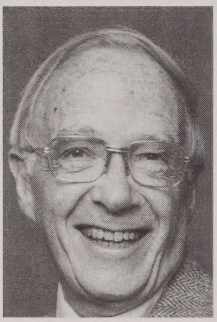
HAPPY ST. VALENTINE'S DAY



Let me ask you a question: Who, above all others, do you give your heart to? The question is important because as Marcus Borg, the outstanding Jesus scholar, tells us, "I give my heart to" was the original meaning of the Latin word *credo*, which we translate today as "I believe." In fact, as late as the 17th century the English word "believe" meant to hold dear, to give one's loyalty to, to love. Believe did not mean, as it so often does today, to give one's mental assent to a statement or set of statements meant to be literally true. There is a vast difference, of course, between giving one's heart to Jesus, or loving God, and believing as true all the things said about them in the Bible, in scripture, or in church.

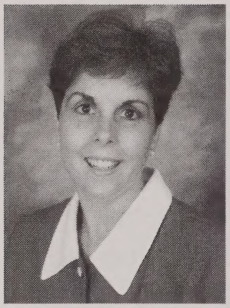
My understanding of the difference was greatly advanced by listening to Marcus Borg, the Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture at Oregon State University, as he spoke about belief—as in believing in Jesus. He helped me to understand that what so many of us were doing was trying to "believe things about Jesus"—what the church and gospels said about Jesus.

Borg's own experience of the sacred in his life, and his highly esteemed, in-depth scholarly studies of the Bible and of scripture, have led him to the understanding that the Christian life is not primarily about "believing" that what the church or Bible say about God or Jesus is literally true. Rather, Borg gives his heart to a deeply loving relationship with that to which the Christian tradition points.

As Borg has written in his mind-opening book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, "My own journey has led beyond belief (and beyond doubt and disbelief) to an understanding of the Christian life as a relationship to the Spirit of God—a relationship that involves one in a journey of transformation"—a sacred journey on which we come to have faith in the whole of existence as life-giving, nourishing, and gracious.

As Saint Valentine could have told you, *credo* means to believe in Jesus in the sense of giving one's heart to him—means moving from what you've heard about Jesus to being in a living relationship with the Spirit of Christ.

GO A LITTLE WILD



Pete Fromm weathered a long winter in the Idaho wilderness. He writes, "I was switchbacking down the last steep southwest slope above the old Nez Perce ford when, at the base of a towering red-barked, ponderosa pine, I stumbled across open dirt. I just stared at it for a moment. It was the first ground I'd seen in four months. . . . I dug my fingers into it and laughed. It smelled like mud and wetness, with the hot scent of the dead needles." Soon a pileated woodpecker screamed through the air toward him and Fromm recalls, "I'd never seen one fly that way before, and once I recovered from the noise of its rush I wondered if the return of the sun was turning everything a little wild."

Ah, February, that middling part of winter, is upon us. Northlanders are beginning to search expectantly for signs of spring—a sprig of green, a fuzzy bud, a wild woodpecker, a brighter sunrise. Those in the South know the birds they've hosted for months now are readying to complete one more loop in their endless migration. As Kathleen Norris puts it, "Spring seems far off, impossible, but it is coming . . . hope is stirring at the edges of the day."

The shift in seasons is coming, but in the intervening, interior time, this issue just calls for you to savor this time, just as it is. Our feature interview with Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg

did you first have intimations that something beyond yourself was real? When did you sense a spiritual longing? Take time to find and tell your own stories—the ones that form your life and faith.

Then allow John Ittner to host you as you spend a day observing the spiritual practices in an ashram. Don't worry if any of the language or ideas are unfamiliar. Consider new terms or notions as you might a snow-covered shrub—after a little digging, you'll see a more familiar sight. For instance, you might wrinkle your forehead when you first see the phrase ,"being *sattwic*," but when compared to more familiar words like shalom or equanimity or spiritual rest, it will become clearer.

Listen to the simple wisdom of Arthur Caliandro, Senior Minister of Manhattan's Marble Collegiate Church. He may challenge you to pay attention to the "wake-up calls" your life constantly offers if only you take the time to notice.

John Van Eenwyk, an Episcopal priest, Jungian analyst, and specialist in treating those who have suffered great trauma, will guide you in "ambient prayer," a form of prayer where you can "immerse yourself in the love of God and extend it to those who are with you."

As always *Illuminations*, *Prayers*, and *Poetry* serve up phrases and profound truths to savor and relish. Don't be surprised as you read if you feel a rush of insight or the desire to make some noise or invite a child to go out and tramp through the cold. Take time to play and pray and listen. Do something you've never done before. It's okay, the return of the sun is supposed to turn everything a little wild. Hope is stirring.

Selections from Pete Fromm and Kathleen Norris both are taken from Winter: A Spiritual Biography of the Season, *©2003 by Gary Schmidt and Susan M. Felch. Published by Skylight Paths.*

Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso

Storytelling and Spirituality

Sandy Eisenberg Sasso

In 1974, Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso became the second woman to be ordained a Rabbi. With her husband, Rabbi Dennis Sasso, they were the first practicing rabbinical couple in the world to jointly lead a congregation. Rabbi Sasso and her husband have served Congregation Beth-El Zedeck in Indianapolis since 1977. She is active in the interfaith community and teaches on the faculty of the Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis where she received her Doctor of Ministry degree after twenty-five years in the rabbinate. She has been honored as one of the "Influential Women in Indiana," as well as one of Indianapolis' most influential clergy.

Sandy is best known as a writer of children's literature. She is author of the award-winning books God's Paintbrush, *and* In God's Name. *Her most recent books are* Cain and Abel: Finding the Fruits of Peace, A Prayer for the Earth: The Story of Naamah, Noah's Wife, God In Between, *and* God Said Amen.

She writes a monthly column in the Indianapolis Star on religious and spirituality issues. Sasso and her husband are the parents of two children.

Sacred Journey: What is the role played by storytelling in spiritual development?

Sandy Sasso: The first language of spirituality really is the story. First, we have a spiritual experience, and we want to communicate that experience and we do that through narrative. Then we want to concretize that narrative and we do that through ritual. Then we want to reflect on the experience and the narrative and that is theology and philosophy. So the story is as close as we get to a spiritual experience in the past. Through the generations, by hearing our peoples' sacred stories, we come closer to their experience of the sacred.

You seem to be saying that story is the intial container of all sacred experience. Why then is it often said that stories are mostly for children?

I'm not sure we think that way any more. Children's book author, Katherine Paterson, once said that to ask children to read is to give them an assignment. To read to them is to give them a gift. Older children and older people like to be read to as well, because a relationship is established between the teller, the story, and the listener. I think it is the human encounter that is so powerful in telling a story regardless of age.

Does storytelling change the idea of religious education to one of religious encounter?

Since there is a relationship between the reader and the story to begin with, not even the writer of the story is going to know where that story will take the reader or the one who hears the story. You never know how a story

is going to go or how a child or reader is going to interpret it. This wonderful encounter between the one who hears and the text is what produces something extraordinary as long as we don't intervene too strongly and say: 'Now let me tell you the moral of the story.' We need to allow the reader to establish his or her own relationship with the story.

What did you learn while writing your children's book about Cain and Abel?

Cain and Abel is a very difficult and sad story. I learned that any one of us can be Cain. In trying to tell the story, I had to understand each of the characters. I had to put on Cain's shoes and understand what was happening in Cain's head. The way I interpret the story is that Cain was treated unfairly. His offering was not accepted, and not for any good reason.

Life is sometimes unfair. I paint the story with things coming easily for Abel. He doesn't have to work as hard as Cain and is the favored one. It felt like an experience that any adult or child would have. Someone else is getting all the perks and all the advantages and isn't working as hard as I am, but I am not doing as well. So this sense of life's inequities is very strong in Cain. Ultimately, he just loses his temper. His anger gains such control of him that he has no ability to work with it. It simply takes over and results in a rock being thrown at Abel.

The questions I ask when I read the story are: Can you think of any rocks we sometimes throw that aren't physical rocks? What do we hurl at other people when we are angry or at people we dislike or hate?

As I began to use the story in classroom settings, I learned through the story to explore how our anger can

get out of control and to ask the question: How can we deal with our anger? It is not going to go away. It is a natural human emotion and a passionate response to a circumstance. We aren't going to get rid of it. So what are we going to do with it?

I also learned from working with the Cain and Abel story that individual acts of hatred and violence have ramifications beyond their immediate scope. While I was researching the story I found a *midrash,* (a commentary on the Biblical text by the rabbis), that tells that the trees went into mourning and nature changed when Cain killed Abel. Everything changed, not just the small area around them.

After 9/11 a member of our congregation was in the fire brigades that came to New York. I spoke with him and what he said was, "I've seen terrible horrors before but what struck me this time was the magnitude and that everything was in black and white. There was no color and no birds sang." When I heard that it gave me chills. Just like in the *midrash*, nature was changed. The environment changed after such terrible violence.

Many people prefer to ignore the terrible Bible stories like Cain and Abel and some say they shouldn't be considered sacred texts. You obviously don't agree. Why?

These stories are real. They tell us something about ourselves. I think that they touch a part of us that is deep within and that is violent, and hateful, and angry. These stories help us confront that and maybe help us find a way though it. If we only told good, wonderful stories about people who are only saints, they wouldn't have anything to do with us. The characters in the early Biblical narratives are human beings with lots of

failings and they make a lot of mistakes. That's why we identify with them and they can talk to us through the centuries.

Is the spiritual task one primarily undertaken by adults at midlife?

It doesn't seem to be the case does it? There are different spiritual tasks at different times in the life cycle. The task of someone in their twenties is different than that of a person in their sixties. There is a spiritual journey to make and our life experience will put us at differing points along the journey.

Children have an innate spirituality and we ignore that at their and our peril. Some may say why not ignore the spiritual questions until children are older and can figure them out for themselves? Here's why: The basis of our society and its well-being, our moral lives, are underpinned by our sense of spiritual belonging and interconnectedness, of intimacy, of our life's purpose. If we don't begin to help young people nurture that part of themselves we create some of the problems we have today. The problems many people have at sixty may stem from not having a nurturing journey from the beginning. Maybe we would avoid some of the problems we later face by caring for the spiritual lives of the children who will one day be adults.

You have said that children open the door of redemption for adults. How can a child help?

Take the hand of a child and walk though a field and you'll notice things you wouldn't otherwise notice. The child will say, 'Look! This is spectacular!' A child will take a dandelion and make a bouquet. An adult will think

about needing to buy weed killer. Children help us notice things we often take for granted. They also have this great sense of spontaneity. They are willing to go out and do something immediately while adults have to be thoughtful and have everything planned. Children don't live that way.

Children also have spontaneous emotions. If a child is very sad, the child will cry. If a child is very happy, the child is going to laugh. Adults often restrain emotions and hold them in check because we have learned to express only what we think is appropriate in certain situations.

Children have a wonderful sense of creativity and willingness to try things. As adults we become less anxious to try things because we are afraid of failing. We don't think we have the skills and are afraid to experiment and children are encouraged to experiment all the time. So children have a lot to teach us about the journey.

You quoted a child who once asked you, "Does your religion give you all the answers?" Tell us what you told him.

I look to religion to help me find out what the questions ought to be and also how to live with the questions. Religion doesn't give us absolute answers. It helps us to see the mystery in life and helps us to explore that. It takes us on a journey.

If you had to tell a story that defines or illustrates your own life, what would you tell?

When I was a young girl, we went each summer to the shore, and I loved playing in the waves. I had no fear and loved jumping the waves all day long until one day I was pushed down by a powerful wave and I couldn't get up. My father, who had to work during the week and came to join us on the weekends, noticed that

I had changed somehow. When he learned why I was afraid he picked me up and carried me over the waves and held me in them until I wasn't afraid anymore.

I didn't remember this story until I was asked as an adult to remember my first experience of God. I know as a child I wouldn't have said it was an experience of God, but it was. I didn't have the language to articulate it. Part of our responsibilities as adults is to give children opportunities to talk about these experiences.

There are stories from my own Jewish tradition that are meaningful to me. There are stories of people seeking for the treasure and going on a journey to find the great treasure only to discover the treasure is back at home.

Jerome Bruner, an educator, once wrote that Peter Pan brought Wendy to Never-Never-Land to teach the lost boys how to tell stories. If they knew how to tell stories they would be able to grow up and wouldn't be lost. To be lost is to have no stories to live by. That's why the telling of stories is so essential to the spiritual search.

As one of the earliest women to become a rabbi, how has the spiritual landscape changed in the nearly thirty years since you were ordained?

The landscape is very different because women have traversed the spiritual landscape in ways they hadn't before. When I started rabbinical school there was not a single book written about women in religion. Now there are shelves and shelves of books about women in scripture, women in theology, women and religious language. You can find everything. And thirty years is quite a short time for all that to happen.

I was the only woman in my rabbinical school until

my third year, then a couple more came. Now fifty percent of the seminarians are female. The conversations are different, the way we look at texts, do ritual, look at language, are different. Gender inclusiveness in prayer has become an issue throughout the religious world. These differences have changed the way we think theologically.

My husband and I created the first covenantal birth ceremony for girls in Judaism when a fellow student of ours had a baby girl. We looked at each other and said, "What are we supposed to do?" Now it is commonplace to have such a ceremony. So the ways we celebrate birth and the way we marry and traverse the life cycle has changed because women's voices have been added.

Women also tend to bring a different style of leadership to religious communities. There was a study done some years ago that shows that under stress the normal response has been "fight or flight." But studies of women have shown that our normal response is to "tend and befriend." This probably has to do with oxytocin levels and the need to stay and protect children in difficult times. This different response is a different way of building community.

What one thing do you know now that you wish you would have known then?

There are so many things! When I started I did not want to focus on a woman's journey. I listened to what the community said was of priority and important at the time. I realize now that I needed to listen to something inside of me that said women's journeys are important in a deeper way. Over the years, I've come to do that. I once wrote a poem called the "Pilgrimage Prayer," and I talked

about how all the male pilgrimages went up a mountain—Moses goes up Mt. Sinai and later dies on Mt. Nebo, and Abraham makes his sacrifice on Mt. Moriah. I wrote about a woman's pilgrimage as being to the well. We need to respect both kinds of pilgrimages and not prioritize one over the other.

For women who may still be pioneers in their own religious institutions or traditions, what advice do you offer?

When I started as a rabbi many people said to me: if your tradition doesn't include women in the way you want it to, why not leave your tradition? My answer was: I love my tradition and that tradition is evolving. Who says that the people who came before and set it as primarily a male tradition have an exclusive right to define that tradition? I am a part of the Jewish tradition, and I, too, have a right to define it. I don't want to give over the definition of who I am as a religious person, in my case, as a Jew, to the male community.

I am a descendent and have received a rich tradition and need to take that seriously and honor it as a people's sacred search for God, but I am also an ancestor. I am going to bequeath the tradition to another generation. I think you need both humility and audacity to do this.

Complete Immersion: A Week Inside a Yoga Ashram

John Ittner

> God has arranged for many ways of worship to suit the various temperaments of God's worshippers in their different stages of growth.
>
> —Sri Ramakrishna

A week inside an ashram is like a peapod with seven peas in it. Each pea is round and perfect in itself, just like each day, but they still come from the same pod. There are seven chances to have the "little glimpse" promised by Swami Vivekananda. The daily ashram schedule has evolved over thousands of years. The schedule is designed to make it possible for you to be a yogi, even just for a day. That is enough to give you a real taste of the lifestyle and substance of that life. The symmetery of ending and beginning the day with meditation creates a frame and makes it easier to see the transformation that is happening. The seven peas turn into pearls all strung together by a thread of yoga. The

John Ittner is a former news editor for the New York Post. This article is excerpted from Lighting the Lamp of Wisdom: A Week Inside a Yoga Ashram. *The book is volume four in the "Week Inside series" published by Skylight Paths Publishing which gives readers an upclose and personal view inside various spiritual retreat centers, from Zen monasteries to meditation centers. The book is available at local and online booksellers or can be purchased directly from the Publisher at www.skylightpaths.com.*

ashram is the pod itself. It protects the peas so they can focus on only one thing: growth . . . .

The wake-up bell rings at 5:30 a.m., but it is as dark outside as the middle of the night. I know this because I have opened one eye. I wish I could say that I always bounce out of bed, but sometimes I do. Getting adjusted to the ashram schedule takes some time. How I wake up depends on how well I sleep. Everyone is different, but I find that it takes about three days to get used to waking up in the dark. Until then the morning bell comes as a shock. After a while at the ashram I need less sleep to be fully rested. Swami Sivananda said that yogis should sleep about six hours. He considered too much sleep to be *tamasic*, lazy. One reason the ashram day starts so early is that the early morning hours are considered especially good for meditation.

As night shifts into day there is a time of balance, a sacred pause called *Brahmamuhurta*, said by yogis to be *sattwic*, a time of balance and peace when meditation comes more easily. As for waking up, at first I find it painful, but by the end of a week it is joyful. The Bhagavad Gita says, "That which is like poison at first, but in the end like nectar—that happiness is declared to be *sattwic*, born of the purity of one's own mind due to Self-realization."

With the help of vigorous bell ringing, the ashram runs on time. For every event of the day, the bell ringing sets off a different reaction. At 5:30 A.M. it is disbelief. At 7:50 A.M. it is anticipation of asana class. At 9:50 A.M., hungry for breakfast, we salivate like Pavlov's dogs.

Wake-up duty is a form of *Karma Yoga.* A member of the ashram staff has to get up first and get everyone else up. In case I miss the bell, a more surgical strike comes

soon after in the form of a gong being pounded briskly in the hall outside the door. The gong sounds weirdly theatrical for that time of day, as if we are getting up to perform on stage. Eventually, even the gong goes away. If I close my eyes again, the next twenty minutes pass in what seems like twenty seconds. The ten-minute warning bell gets me out of the sack, knowing that I have only ten minutes before meditation begins in the temple. As much as I enjoy sleeping, I hate being late for *satsang* and missing the meditation. I rush through the morning self-cleansing ritual. I wash my feet, hands, and face. I brush my teeth and put on clean clothes. These are called temple rules. When I follow them I am more *sattwic*. The word, which means pure, or clear, is derived from the Sanskrit *sattwa* and describes a state wherein nature is in balance and the mind sees unity and truth. Meditation experience confirms that "cleanliness is next to godliness." They just seem to go together.

Outside the temple doors, a sign is posted requesting silence for the ten minutes preceding the meditation. The sign is posted because ashram guests tend to gather there until the last minute, and some people are already meditating in the temple. The temple is entered from a hall between the farmhouse and the temple. This hall is wide enough for chairs and sofas and serves as the ashram's axis—its major highway, artery, and hangout. It runs from the front door to a mud room to a sitting room with a wood stove, and ends at the tearoom. It is also the favorite of the ashram cats, Bikshu and Nandi, whose beds flank the stove. In the winter, a crowd forms around the stove, and the cats soak up the warmth and attention. People with sleepy faces burn their tongues with hot tea to wake up outside the temple doors.

Company of the Wise

The ashram day begins with meditation, chanting, and a talk about yoga. This gathering is called *satsang*, which means "company of the wise." It is basically a religious service. There are two *satsangs* every day: one from 6:00 to 7:30 in the morning and the other from 8:00 until 9:30 in the evening. *Satsangs* are major ashram events, and attendance is considered mandatory. At Sivananda ashrams, *satsang* is first on the schedule in the morning and the last event at night before bedtime. The morning and evening *satsangs* are the heart of the ashram experience. These rituals create a sacred space between them and set the tone for everything that follows. Ashram life can be understood as a series of rituals designed to lift the awareness to a higher level and keep it there.

Satsang is mandatory at Sivananda ashrams to ensure that visitors will be able to experience the transforming power of yoga. They need to participate in the rituals to get the full effect. When people take a holiday, they often sleep late, but anyone who sleeps until ten o'clock at the ashram misses half the day. The way to have the best possible ashram experience is to join in and keep an open mind. There is ancient knowledge behind these practices, and those who open up can absorb some of it. This is especially true of *satsangs*, which are easily the most foreign events in the day for Westerners. At *satsang* we practice three kinds of yoga. First, we meditate; this is a form of *Raja Yoga* in which we work on concentrating the mind. Second, we chant; this is *Bhakti Yoga*, the path of love and devotion to God. The *satsang* ends with a talk about *Vedanta*, the philosophy of yoga. This path is called *Jnana Yoga*, which uses the power of the mind to sort out

the difference between the eternal and that which changes. By practicing all three, one prepares the way for progress in all aspects of yoga. These three yogas support one another, deepening the experience. *Bhakti Yoga* engages the heart and keeps the *Jnana Yoga* from getting stuck in the head. *Raja Yoga* meditation without devotion is less powerful than it is with devotion. When people worship together there is a sharing, and everyone gets more out of it. Everyone's presence at *satsang* makes a difference.

I go straight into the temple with three minutes to spare. On this Saturday morning the temple is almost full. There are about twenty guests, plus about ten staff members. This is a decent showing for midwinter. On the summer weekends there can be sixty or more guests, and on holidays there may be a hundred or more. Entering the temple is like entering another world, a sacred space where only one thing really matters—discovering the God that is inside me. Everything about *satsang* is for the purpose of enhancing this experience of inner silence. I kneel to the altar and sit on a cushion with my legs crossed. The idols on the altar seem to glow in the dim light. Fresh flowers flank them. An oil lamp gives a steady yellowish light in the bluish predawn. The incense wafts through the still air. As I shut my eyes the temple doors open behind me, and the latecomers enter. I can hear them trying not to make any noise. The rustling, the coughing, and the clearing of throats take a couple of minutes to settle down.

Sometimes meditation is easy. Other times the mind has a mind of its own. The mind is so hard to control that Swami Vishnu sometimes compared it to a drunken monkey that has been stung by a scorpion. It cannot be kept from wandering, and it has to be watched. The only solution is to gently keep bringing it back. As sound dies

away I feel a change in the atmosphere, and calm prevails. In the peaceful morning we are touched by the silence. Having touched the silence, we want to dive deeper.

Sometimes, when my mind is restless, I open my eyes and gaze at the altar for a couple of minutes. Then I close my eyes again and try to meditate. When I close my eyes, the idols on the altar remain for a moment as afterimages. They help to hold the mind steady. Like people, the idols wear different garments from day to day. There is a devotional ritual called *puja* in which the idols are lovingly dressed by a priest or members of the ashram staff. This *Bhakti Yoga* practice is one of the subtle touches the staff adds to the ashram atmosphere. Just as a child plays the role of an adoring mother with her dolls, the devotee ceremonially acts out here the love of God. It is said by Patanjali in his Yoga-Sutras that devotion is the easiest way to cultivate concentration and meditation.

The meditation ends when Srinivasan, the director of the Yoga Ranch, breaks the silence with "Om." We repeat the sacred syllable three times. When I open my eyes the early morning darkness has turned into light. Some darkness in me is also dispelled, and I too am lighter. Meditation seems to end at about the time when I have forgotten that I've been meditating. At the end of the meditation I was no longer aware of my body. The change is subtle and softening, but my foot has fallen asleep and feels as if it belongs to someone else. I massage it to get the blood moving again. When the lights are turned on at 6:30, my mind is refreshed and deeply relaxed. It is time to chant.

Singing the Names of the Lord

Srinivasan slides his gently battered harmonium to a position in front of his lap and plays the opening chord to

the familiar *Jaya Ganesha*. At Sivananda ashrams every *kirtan* begins like this. The chanting of *Jaya Ganesha* brings a welcome change from sitting in silence. The atmosphere in the temple evolves from solemn to joyous when the chanting begins. The *prana*, the life force, starts pumping, and the spirit moves to the sound of the mantras. Various drums, tambourines, bells, and other percussion instruments are passed out to accompany the chanting. Some people clap their hands. It is said that in ancient times the *rishis*, or saints, developed *kirtan* as one way to control the mind and bring the mind's focus to the Divine. *Kirtan* is singing God's name with devotion, or *bhava*. It is said that chanting the name of the Lord soothes the nerves, turns the emotions in a positive direction, and purifies the heart. Even so, many people find it strange at first.

This chant begins with a *mantra* hailing the elephant-headed god, Ganesha, and asking for his protection. Ganesha is worshiped as a remover of obstacles. Nothing gets in his way. Because there are so many obstacles in our way to success in both the spiritual and the physical worlds, he is very popular. We need to remove the obstacles just to get started. There is something jolly about his image as well. He is nonthreatening and lovable, like Babar the Elephant. It is said that his image embodies the primordial word "Om." Just as many chants begin with "Om," many chants also begin by giving homage to Ganesha.

The purpose of chanting is to create a pure vibration that can open the heart. The chanting works best when the chanter pronounces the Sanskrit words correctly with devotion and awareness of the meaning. The sound of the *mantra* is said to be the embodiment of God. In the first chapter of the Gospel of John in the New Testament,

the first line says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God." That sounds like the definition of a *mantra*. With this in mind, let us go through the translation of *Jaya Ganesha* step by step. By understanding this seminal chant, we can learn something about what is considered important in this form of worship. For the sake of brevity, I will not include the Sanskrit words that are actually chanted but rather focus on what they mean.

The chant begins by saying "victory to Ganesha." It asks him to save and protect us. He is not only the remover of obstacles but also the god of new beginnings. At the beginning of a new day or a new venture, it is considered auspicious to ask his help. The verses that follow invoke Subramanya, the leader of the army of the gods, asking him to help drive off all demons and negative influences. Next, Saraswati, patroness of arts and learning, is saluted. Saraswati bestows intuition, intelligence, self-control, and success in deep subjects. The guru, who is seen as God, is hailed next for giving the teachings that lead to bliss and knowledge. The *Maha Mantra*, or Great Mantra, is then sung in praise of Ram and Krishna. This is among the most powerful of all the *mantras* and is best known as Hare Krishna. It bestows purity to the heart and the mind. Next, the guru Swami Sivananda and his disciple Swami Vishnu-Devananda have their turn. This is followed by the *mantra* to Siva, the destroyer of evil and the first and greatest of all the gurus. Then Vishnu, the preserver of the universe, is celebrated with his *mantra*. The repetition of this very powerful *mantra* is said to bring infinite peace, mercy, and goodness. This *mantra* is chanted daily at the ashram to create a vibration that helps bring peace to the world. Next to be hailed is Vasudeva, another name for Krishna. It is Krishna who bestowed the most valuable of

all Vedantic texts, the Bhagavad Gita, to humankind. Then Swami Sivananda and Swami Vishnu-Devananda are once more invoked, followed by praises to Ram, who is God in the form of the ideal man, and to Hanuman, the monkey god who personifies devotion. The next two *mantras* invoke Dattatreya and Sankaracharya, two great gurus of *advaita* (nondualistic) Vedanta. As we approach the end, Krishna is hailed once more, and the chant finally ends with a *mantra* invoking Siva.

After a week in an ashram, parts of this chant become embedded in the unconscious mind. The tune is as simple as a child's song, and there are not very many words. Some *mantras* are short and sweet, capable of being repeated with one breath, and others are long. At first, *Jaya Ganesha* is incomprehensible—just a series of sounds—but after a while the words become more familiar. If you stay at the ashram for a week and attend all the *satsangs*, you will have chanted *Jaya Ganesha* fourteen times. At about twenty minutes apiece, that adds up to about four hours on this chant alone . . . . All this repetition reminds me of the movie Groundhog Day, in which Bill Murray keeps waking up over and over again to Sonny and Cher singing "I Got You, Babe." I find this movie to be a fair analogy for the ritual of ashram life. You do the same things over and over again. You follow the same rituals in the same order. The only thing that changes is you.

Giving Chants a Chance

There is a wide range of feelings among first-time visitors on the subject of chanting. Some dive right in and love it immediately. Other people say they find the Sanskrit confusing. They are bothered by not knowing

what the chants mean. They worry about praising gods they have never heard of. This problem seems to be larger for some than for others. Some people may also be bothered that attendance at *satsang* is required. They came for the *asanas*, yoga postures, and got religion. There are places to go for those who would prefer to practice *asanas* and eat healthy food in lovely surroundings and not mix religion into it, but they are spas and not ashrams. Most people at the ashram are open-minded on the subject. They do not object to the devotional aspect of yoga. One big reason people come to an ashram for the first time is to become aligned with a higher power, to make their lives more spiritual. They are prepared for something different from the familiar. They want a break from the limitations of everyday life. Those who give themselves permission to chant with an open heart, without fear that they are slighting the religious tradition into which they were born, often find themselves enjoying it. That enjoyment turns out to be the first step to deeper knowledge of what it means to praise the Lord, whether in the form of Jesus, Jehovah, Buddha, or any other god. For me, sometimes chanting is like the magic moment when disbelief has been suspended and the characters in a movie come to life, only more powerfully. This is purely personal, but I have felt closer to the divine power when chanting than when meditating.

I am one of those people who tried to follow the words and join in even without knowing what they meant. I remember stumbling through the verses and thinking that I did not have a clue. Having been brought up as a Christian, I wondered if Jesus would hear these prayers and be offended—jealous maybe. There was a picture of Jesus on the wall behind the altar in the ashram's temple, but there is no Ganesha on the altar of any church I have

ever attended. I would still put myself in the category of those who feel that they do not understand exactly what it all means. Having heard and chanted *Jaya Ganesha* many times, I am still changing the way I feel about it. Since it works for me, I give chanting of *mantras* the benefit of the doubt. It was the hardest yoga practice to feel comfortable about at first, but it did not contradict my understanding of the teachings of Christ. Through experience I had gained faith in all the yogic practices I had tried, so it was easy for me to give chanting a chance. I had already experienced the health benefits of *asana* practice and the yogic diet. Having seen for myself that ashram life was healthy and positive, I saw nothing to fear in chanting. Now, when I worship in a church, I have an enriched appreciation of singing hymns, and I enjoy singing them even more. From my days of singing in the church choir, I have always felt that music was the most direct way to feel the presence of God.

Now I look forward to *kirtan*. I love the way it wakes me up and gets the blood going after meditation. It is a chance to praise God directly, which is something of a relief after a long silent meditation of looking within. During the morning chants I become more and more awake. Swami Sivananda, who said there were many paths to God, called *kirtan* the easiest, surest, and quickest way to God-realization in the difficult times in which we live. Swami Vishnu liked to joke that it was also the cheapest . . . .

Images and Idols on the Altar

Chanting is followed by a talk on the practice and philosophy of yoga. In a recent talk, Srinivasan addressed the meaning of the idols on the altar. Getting accustomed to the altar takes some time. There are so many elements that visitors can be confused. After three years of coming

to the ashram I was still not sure about the meaning of some of the statues and pictures. So I was very glad when Sri (his nickname) took up the subject. I had been concerned at first that I was worshiping idols, and the first commandment of the Hebrew scripture clearly states, "Thou shalt not put any other gods before me." I did not know how to feel about worshiping at an altar that had lots of gods on it. There was a picture of Jesus, but it seemed strange to see him in the same context as Hanuman, the monkey god, Krishna playing his flute, or Swami Sivananda . . . .

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Srinivasan . . . . was not born a yogi or a Hindu, so he knows very well what we want to know. The temple is quiet after the chanting as he turns toward the altar. The idols and images of gods and gurus are arrayed there in a

splendor that seems very exotic in upstate New York. They look as if they had dropped down from another world.

"There are many kinds of idols," he says with a gesture to the altar.

"We create all kinds of idols. Most of the idols in this culture are material idols. These are the kinds of idols they spoke about in the Bible, worshiping gold, worshiping power and position, fame. We create icons for all these things, worshiping sex. The media and advertising are full of idols. The whole culture is based on creating these icons. Money is an idol. An idol can be the dollar bill with a president's picture on it. These are some of the idols of our culture."

He pauses to shift gears. "But idols can be very positive. They can be images that remind us of who we are, not in a sense of being separate, but in a sense of being one, of being divine, of being bliss, of being knowledge, of being love. These idols help us to be caring and compassionate."

He turns again to the altar. "The question is, why do we use these images? It's like when you can have pictures of your children on your desk at work to remind you of your love of your children. The pictures of your kids are symbols that remind you of what is important to you. The same is true of the idols on this altar. They are symbols connecting us to something that is important to us.

"What is important to us?" he asks rhetorically. "Some things we give importance to are leading us toward freedom. They lead us back to knowing who we really are. They lead us back to our Self. Every religion has symbols. Christ is a symbol. The Torah is a symbol. Buddha is a symbol. The symbol focuses the mind and concentrates it.

"In the yoga philosophy everything is spirit, all-pervading consciousness. According to yoga, this

realization of the Absolute is the same in all religions. The question is, how do we let go of our identification with the body and the senses? How do we let go of our fears and ambitions? How do we identify with the spirit? Yoga says you can concentrate your mind on religious symbols from any tradition. From there you can explore that aspect of divinity until it expands and includes everything. Swami Vishnu felt that people made the most spiritual progress when they worshiped the symbols they were most familiar with."

Someone asks, "But why are there so many different symbols of God on the altar if any one of them will do?"

"Different people see divinity in different places," says Sri. "The altar is a place of focus. If you can see God in one place, you can see God everywhere. The central focus on this altar is Krishna. Krishna represents God as love, the love that gives meaning to our life, the love that is all-knowledge. Krishna is the indweller of all beings as pure love. Krishna is a symbol that reminds us that God is love and the purpose of life is love. The flute that Krishna plays stands for us. He is making music through us. Krishna leads us from false values and false idols and leads us to the knowledge that all is love."

Again he turns back toward the altar and motions to the image beneath Krishna.

"This is Durga," he adds, "the Divine Mother. She's like Mary. The Divine Mother is also the Mother Earth. The first relationship we have is with the mother. And for many people, identifying with the mother is like identifying with all creation. Durga is both loving and ferocious when it comes to saving us from our lower selves. See, she is riding on a tiger. To her right is someone you are all familiar with, Jesus. He is a symbol of the love of God. On

her left is Sankaracharya, a great yogi who founded this order of yoga that we practice. He lived sometime around the eighth century. We practice his *advaita* philosophy that says there is one God. Above him is a picture of Swami Sivananda, one of the great saints of the last century. He really made yoga accessible to the West. He wrote hundreds of books in English. His teaching is to serve, love, give, purify, meditate, realize. He trained many swamis and our founder, Swami Vishnu-Devananda, a master of *Hatha Yoga* and *Raja Yoga* . . . .

Sri points to a teapot-sized image. "On the left of the altar is the elephant-looking statue of Ganesha. If you go to any Hindu temple, you always find Ganesha. He is like the 'Om' spoken before the *mantra*. He represents pure bliss. By remembering that he is pure bliss—he surmounts all obstacles."

Sri has a thought that makes him smile. "Sometimes Ganesha gives us some obstacles so that we can learn to let go. Obstacles are a way he shows us how to see our limitations and bring us back." Amused at the ways of Ganesha, Sri shows a toothy grin and continues.

"The statue on the right is Hanuman. He is the incarnation of *prana*, or the life force. The main way we experience life is through the mind, and the mind is like a monkey. We all know how hard it is to control the mind, but the way Hanuman controls the mind is through devotion. If you turn your mind toward God, the monkey mind becomes calm. Hanuman is always repeating the name of Ram. He is the embodiment of devotion, of the mind, and of the life force.

"The little statue on the left is the Siva lingam," he says. It looks like an egg in an egg cup sitting in a saucer with a spout on it. There are many symbols for Siva. The best known is the Siva Nataraj, or Dancing Shiva, the one

with six arms dancing in a circle. This Siva lingam is purely abstract, a primordial phallic symbol.

"Siva is a symbol that reminds us of the absolute consciousness in which life is a cosmic dance of creation and destruction. Remember that nothing dies. Everything changes."

The discussion ends with that statement, and *satsang* finishes soon after the final chant, called *Arati*: the waving of the light. We stand and pay homage to all the gods and gurus as one of the devotees who has been trained in the ritual waves a candle before the altar. All the idols mentioned earlier are given this respect, along with many others. As the chant finishes, the candle is carried through the temple so that all can take some of the light for themselves.

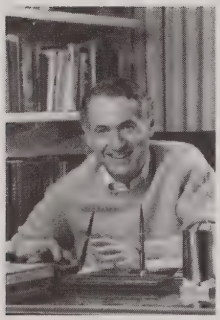
The final ritual of *satsang* is *prasad*, food that has been offered to God first and then passed around to all the worshipers. By taking the prasad we share food with God. It is always taken with the right hand.

By the time morning *satsang* has ended, you are well prepared for the rest of the day. The ashram day is remarkably well designed, as each activity makes you hungry for what happens next. After almost two hours of sitting, your body has an appetite for exercise. You can't wait for *asana* class. After *satsang*, the ashram staff members stay behind in the temple to discuss what chores must be done that day and who will do them. For the guests, this is teatime, a chance to socialize for about fifteen minutes before the start of the morning *asana* class. You really appreciate having a short break, and these few minutes seem almost giddy. Chanting can get you really high, and the *prasad* is usually sweet. People chatter like birds until the bell rings, announcing that *asana* class is about to begin.

A TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCE

The Gift of Life's Wake-Up Calls

Arthur Caliandro



I would like to begin by sharing the words of Kirby Page, the author of *Living Courageously* and other books. It is a statement worth thinking about:

"It is absolutely incredible, the way we walk through life with head down, lowered eyes and unheeding ears. To the presence of a veritable miracle we stand as unblinking as an old cow in the meadow."

He is telling us that too often we seem to be sleepwalking through a world filled with wonders. Instead of seeing one miracle after another, most of us see only a blur. Through the ages, great thinkers have considered this problem. Plato said, "To wonder is the beginning of living and thinking."

Dr. Caliandro's sermon is reprinted with permission from the author and from MarbleVision, the media ministry of Marble Collegiate Church. For more information contact MarbleVision, 212-686-2770 or visit the Marble Church website located at www.marblechurch.org . A recently released video series, Simple Faith Journeys with Dr. Caliandro *offers viewers a unique combination of sightseeing and insight seeking. "The Road to Rome, Part I," is now available and provides perspective for both personal or group use. We highly recommend it. Dr. Caliandro is a trustee of Fellowship in Prayer.*

Henry David Thoreau observed, "The millions are awake enough for physical labor. But only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, and only one in hundreds of millions is awake enough to achieve a divine life."

Today we live in an age of speed, technology, computers and information. Yet we seem to have lost our sense of awe. Many of us seem to be just sleepwalking.

Jesus faced the same challenge. Time and again, day after day, He tried to bring life to His disciples, to crowds of people. He tried to ignite some kind of energy in them. He tried to give them a sense of who they were, of what they were given, and of the wonder of life. Did He not say:

"I have come that you might have life, and have it in all of its fullness."

We know that the Psalmist said: "This is the day which the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it."

What is the problem with us? Well, some of us are bored. We've shut down, and life has become one continuous yawn. We're closed off from the wonder of it. Many more of us have become so busy that life has become clouded and fogged. Our whole lives are scheduled. We can't see beyond the tension, anxiety and worry. Because of our inner turmoil, we're not alive to what's going on in the moment.

How can we turn this problem around? One way is by listening to life, the real teacher. The lessons that we need to learn are given to us by our daily experiences. I daresay that most of us receive a wake-up call every single day.

Illness can be one of the biggest wake-up calls. Often when we become ill, life is telling us that we are moving too fast. It is as though we are driving our bodies faster and faster as though they were cars, yet refusing to shift

out of first gear. We need second, third gear. We need overdrive! We need to be relaxed as we move along.

Illness demands something else from us too. When we get sick, we are wise to ask the question, "What is my participation in this illness? Why has my body been a willing host to this problem?"

We don't like to ask that question. We like to think illness comes from the outside. "This is not my fault, not my responsibility." we like to think. But Hans Selye, the grandfather of the stress movement, said that all illness is stress-related. Of course, we all have vulnerabilities and genetic predispositions to certain ailments. But when we become ill, the question we must ask is, "Where in my life am I a participant in this particular illness?"

Most of us receive a spiritual wake-up call every day.

Some of you know my story. When I was forty-five years old, I went outside one morning to take out the garbage. We were living in White Plains. It was a chilly morning, and I felt a little tightness in my chest. I'd never had that feeling before. I went back inside into the heat and I felt fine again.

A few days later, it happened again. I took an aspirin, and again I felt fine. Up to that point in my life, my belief had been, "If you don't feel good, you wait awhile, you take an aspirin, and everything is well."

That Thanksgiving, we were in Hawaii. I was swimming, and there was that tightness in my chest again and I thought, "I'm in trouble. Something's wrong." Still, I said nothing to anyone. I got back to New York. One Sunday morning, I was walking from Grand Central Station to Marble Collegiate church. I got as far as Lord

& Taylor's, nine blocks north of here, and I couldn't walk any more. I was stopped. The pressure and tension in my chest were so hard.

So I went to the doctor, and he told me I had angina. I had heard the word before, but I didn't want to know anything about it. It would never affect me! But I had it. Angina means that the arteries are blocked and the blood supply cannot go to the heart.

And so I had surgery. I was blessed to have a wonderful surgeon. He was not only skilled at what he did, but skilled in the art of compassion. And he said, "Arthur, you know this kind of thing doesn't just *happen*. I'm going to make a suggestion to you. I want to refer you to a psychiatrist."

A psychiatrist! Me, needing a psychiatrist?

But I found a wonderful one. After a few visits, I asked him, "Can you tell me why I got sick?"

And he answered me, just like that. He had me figured out in the first ten minutes of our first session. He said, "Clogged-up arteries mean clogged-up emotions." I had trouble accepting that. I'm expressive. I'm from an Italian heritage. I cry at movies. But I knew deep down that he was on to something.

Then he said, "Everybody that I have seen who has clogged arteries has repressed anger." And I knew he had me. I knew that I had a lot of anger stirring around in me, and that I never knew how to locate it or express it healthily. I had spent years literally swallowing my anger.

"I'm going to be a nice man." I always thought. "I'm going to be Christian. Christians don't get angry."

He helped me to get in touch with my anger. And then he said another important thing: "Everybody who has the problem feels trapped in some area of life. Caught, unable to move out of a situation."

And I knew he had nailed me again; I was a participant in the illness that I had. In order to get well, I would have to participate in the healing process.

That illness was a wake-up call for me. It has been an incredible gift. It has forced me to get in touch with problems I would not have related to otherwise, and it has made my life fuller.

Before my illness, I had lived a life of postponement. "I will look at the colors later on, I told myself. "I will get together with my friends someday. Some Christmas, I will go up to Rockefeller Center to look at the tree. Maybe next year. I'm too busy now." My illness broke me out of that pattern. It made me attentive to the really important things in life.

My guess is that everybody has had some kind of major illness or been close to it, or experienced a major traumatic event. Those were wake-up calls. Were you paying serious attention to the messages they brought?

A few days ago, I was talking with a minister friend from here in the city. He told me he had recently met with a group of young male executives who were making a lot of money in their great jobs. They were working very hard. They had everything they had ever wanted. But they said to him, "Reverend, we have all of this, but we don't have a life."

Statements like that are wake-up calls. Those men were beginning to move into another dimension. They were listening to the call of that still, small inner voice that speaks to us all.

In the quiet and darkness of night, what is that voice telling you? When you're in the midst of a mishmash of activity and bothersome stuff, what is that voice saying? Listen to it. There's a good chance that voice is telling you the truth about yourself.

Laurie Beth Jones, in her book *Jesus in Blue Jeans*, writes about keeping life precious, which means staying in touch with life's wonder. She writes that when Moses came down from the mountain bearing the Ten Commandments, he was telling us to keep life precious. Do not take the name of the Lord in vain, keep His name precious. Remember the Sabbath, keep it holy and precious. Honor you father and your mother, keep them precious. Do not commit adultery, keep your marriage vows precious. Do not kill, keep life precious.

There's something disturbing to me in the American soul today. There's such harshness in our attitude toward those who have committed crimes. Now, everybody needs to be accountable for what they do, but I view as horrific the decision the Supreme Court made in 1977 when it reinstated the death penalty. We are the only western country that has this penalty. It's barbaric.

Whenever I mention this topic, people say, "Arthur, you don't understand!" I do understand. I understand when Jesus was on the cross, He did not call for revenge against the people who had Him killed. He did not belittle himself by the smallness of doing to others what they had done to Him.

In the *New York Times*, I read an article by Bob Herbert called "Inside the Death House: The Grisly Work of Executions." He had interviewed a number of people who worked in a prison in Texas, where many executions happen. One guard, a man who had often participated in executions, said, "I was working in my shop one day, and all of a sudden something just triggered in me. I started shaking. I walked back into the house and my wife asked, 'What is the matter?' Tears, uncontrollable tears, were coming out of my eyes. I said, 'I just thought about that

execution that I did two days ago, and everybody else's that I was involved in.' Something triggered within me, and all those executions all sprung forward in my mind."

The Rev. Carroll Pickett, a chaplain who was present for ninety-five executions before he retired, observed, "Lots of guards quit. Even those tough guards you're talking about, a lot of those quit."

Those are wake-up calls, wake-up calls to our sense of values. Wake-up calls to the sense of the precious, to the realization that life itself is precious.

Gary Zukav, in his book *Soul Stories*, refers to Victor Frankl, the late Austrian psychiatrist. During World War II, Frankl was a prisoner in a concentration camp. His captors took everything away from him. They killed many of his friends. They forced him to live in terrible conditions, to work in the cold with little clothing, to sleep in a frozen barracks.

One morning Frankl and his fellow prisoners were going to a job, the guards were yelling at them and hitting them with their rifle butts. Then something strange came over Dr. Victor Frankl. He began to understand his reason for being. He saw that he was not a victim, that he was not to belittle himself by acting toward his persecutors as they were acting toward him. He saw that his whole job in life was to learn to love. Even in those horrendous circumstances, he could keep life precious and hold on to it.

That's a wake-up call. It's a gift. Let us look for our own gifts as well.

Let us pray.

Lord, we thank you for this time together, for sharing this word and, Lord, for the call to keep life precious and to be aware and alert to the good things that are happening. May this be in each of our lives. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

ILLUMINATIONS

I am a place where God's love turns up in this world.
~ M. Basil Pennington

It is certain moreover, that nobody is ever able to keep praying in the same way. A person prays in one manner when cheerful, in another when weighted down by sadness or a sense of hopelessness. When one is flourishing spiritually, prayer is different from when one is oppressed by the extent of one's struggles. One prays in this manner when seeking pardon for sins, and in another when asking for a particular grace or virtue or the elimination of a particular vice. Sometimes prayer is conditioned by compunction, occasioned by the thought of hell and desire for the good things to come. A person prays in one manner when in dangerous straits and in another when enjoying quiet and security. Prayer is sometimes illumined by the revelation of heavenly mysteries, but at other times one is forced to be content with the sterile practice of virtue and the experience of aridity.
~John Cassian

Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery.
~Annie Dillard

Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy.
~Abraham Heschel

The next message you need is right where you are.
~Ram Dass

To have a place to stand is a basic human need in order that I know where I belong, and it is necessary both in relation to the places and to the people in my life. It means, above all, that I have time and space for listening to the word of God in all the many ways that God is reaching out to me. That will be totallly impossible if I am always running, late, distracted, feeling ajar and torn apart. . . . Respecting boundaries, not letting things drift means that I am totally present to whatever I am doing, present with awareness, and therefore with energy for whatever that place, that moment may bring me.

~Esther DeWaal

When the wave touches the water within her, she is not afraid.

~Thich Nhat Hanh

You will find as you look back upon your life that the moments you have really lived are the moments when you have done things in the spirit of love.

~Henry Drummond

On discovering your purpose in life: If you do follow your bliss, you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you, and the life you ought to be living is the one you are living. When you can see that, you begin to meet people who are in the field of bliss, and they open doors to you. I say, follow your bliss and don't be afraid, and doors will open where you didn't know they were going to be.

~Joseph Campbell

Ambient Prayer

John Van Eenwyk

Prayer is the most intimate celebration of our relationship with God. We examine ourselves, confess our faults, seek reconciliation, make our needs known, propose solutions to problems, ventilate our frustrations, reconcile ourselves to the inevitable, even think things over—all in God's presence.

Yet, sometimes it is difficult to pray. We don't like expressing negative emotions to God. We forget that God accepts our anger, alarm, resentment, despair, bitterness, silence—even our hatred—as easily as God accepts our love, praise, gratitude, and worship. As long as we are willing to connect with God, God accepts us as we are.

Dr. John R. Van Eenwyk received his Ph.D. in religion and psychological studies from the University of Chicago. A clinical psychologist, he maintains a private practice in Jungian Analysis in Olympia, Washington. He is also an ordained priest in the Episcopal Church, a clinical instructor at the University of Washington School of Medicine, and the Director of the International Trauma Treatment Program. The author of Archetypes and Strange Attractors: The Chaotic World of Symbols, *he lectures internationally on Jungian psychology and the treatment of torture survivors.*

Prayer can also be difficult in those situations that defy words. In these cases, we have several options. We can use prayers that have been previously written for the situation. We can turn to glossalalia, uttering sounds that express more than words. We can join hands and pray silently. Or, we can engage in ambient prayer. What is ambient prayer? I use the term to describe a form of prayer in which we immerse ourselves in the love of God and extend it to those who are with us. Think of the presence of God as if it were a place, like a room. It would have a distinct feel, with dimension, color, form, and texture, like the place where you are reading this now.

Close your eyes for a minute, and listen to all the sounds that you don't hear when you are listening to or concentrating on a particular something. These are called ambient sound. You might hear soft music in the distance, or the low hum of the ventilation system, or the sound of traffic outside. If you are in an unusually quiet place, all you may hear is the low rumble of your blood circulating or the high whine of your brain functioning. We are constantly surrounded by sounds we don't notice because we are not concentrating on them.

God's love is like ambient sound. We are constantly surrounded by God's love even when we are not aware of it. Ambient prayer puts us in touch with that love. It moves us through and beyond the situations we are in. As we fill ourselves with the knowledge of God's love, we can then let it flow through us to surround those among us. We create an ambience of God's love by being a conduit through which it can flow.

Let me give you two examples. I first discovered ambient prayer when I was traveling with my family in Zimbabwe. The president of the country was arming teen-

age thugs to take over farms and to intimidate members of the opposition party. Just before we arrived, he had declared all white people to be enemies of the state. About a week into our trip, we arrived at a backpacker's lodge only to find it jammed with Peace Corps volunteers who were being given the chance to leave the country if they wished.

My worst fears came out at night while I was lying in bed. How could I surrender myself to sleep when attacks usually came at night? How could I protect myself, my family, and those around me? I wanted to do more than just ask God to protect us. I wanted to feel that protection as a presence surrounding us all.

As I ran out of words and simply lay there in prayer, I suddenly felt a great calm. Could I extend it to everyone else? I decided to imagine that it was flowing through me into the lodge, surrounding and permeating all of us. Soon, I was resting secure in the knowledge that God was truly looking out for us and protecting us from harm.

Of course, we could all have been killed anyway. But if we had, at least we would have left this existence surrounded by the love of God. How could we lose?

My second example may be more familiar. When we are sitting with others around the bed of someone dying, we often feel particularly powerless. Being able to pray together is a great comfort. But what if there are among us those who are either non-believers or members of another religion and would be offended by our prayer? Or, what if we have prayed and everyone wishes to sit in silence for a while.

We could pray silently. But what if we want our prayers to be more than requests to God? What if we need an answer, right now? Then, we can turn to ambient prayer. As we open ourselves to God's love and

allow it to permeate every cell of our bodies, we can extend it to everyone else. We can experience the upwelling of God's love as it expands into a quiet warmth that fills the room and everyone in it. We can nurture its growth to others in the ward, on the floor, in the hospital, in the town, in the world.

How do we know that it's real? How do we know that others will feel it? We can't. And some won't. All we can know is how we feel. Nevertheless, feelings tend to be contagious. Large crowds are particularly prone to panic when one person feels panicky. The quiet demeanor of one person can calm others. One person's excitement can easily spread to others. The tears of one can rapidly become the tears of all. We are more in tune with one another than we realize.

Ambient prayer is easy to do. It may be the most basic form of prayer, perhaps even the foundation of prayer. To practice ambient prayer, you will need to be able both to open yourself to God's love and to release it to the world around you. As God's love is infinite, it will fill you to overflowing. Your job is to be an access point for God's love to fill the world.

First, you must teach yourself to relax. As you are to become a channel through which God's love can flow to all, you must be as open as possible. As with all channels, freedom from turbulence facilitates the smoothest flow. The wire with the least resistance allows current to flow most freely. So, first you must relax.

Take a deep breath and let it out. As you exhale, feel all the tensions and conflicts draining out of you. Let yourself go limp, at least inside. Open yourself to God's love. If necessary, take another deep breath and let it out. Repeat as necessary.

When you are able to allow yourself to relax, you can practice the second phase of ambient prayer. Let yourself be filled with God's love. Let it fill you to overflowing. Let it fill the entire space you are in. Let it fill all who are in that space with you. Let it flow unimpeded to the entire world. Let yourself be a channel through which God's love for all humankind can flow.

As you become more accomplished at ambient prayer, you may find yourself increasingly in a prayerful attitude. As you become ever more open to God, you will become ever more open to the world. Filled with God's love, you may find others treating you as a valuable resource in their own lives. They will need from you nothing more than your presence.

Like your body, which continues to function without any input from you while you are relaxed, you may find that others gain access to God's love through no effort of your own. You may begin to feel more secure than ever before. You may find that people who others fear or avoid are comfortable in your presence and bear you no malice. You may find yourself trusted in the face of suspicion, accepted in the face of rejection, loved where there is hatred.

Or, you may not. Others may vilify, reject, or ignore you. But if that is to happen, what better way to experience it than filled with God's love? Even the worst of experiences go better when we are filled with the warm security of God's love.

When nothing else works, when nothing else is possible, ambient prayer can help. At the very least, God's love may fill you to overflowing. At the most, it might flow through you to the rest of the world. Either way, you become an essential part of God's love for the world. That alone makes it worthwhile.

Seattle Zen Poem

Jon Wesick

Sometimes I sit and watch my thoughts
come and go like clouds in the sky.
When one stays too long,
others gather,
and soon there is a shower.
It rains a lot here,
but last night it was clear,
and I observed the moon.

Jon Wesick has published over sixty poems in small press journals like Anthology Magazine, Edgz, *and* Pudding. *He has a Ph.D.in physics and is a long time student of Buddhism and the martial arts.*

PRAYERS

Encircle Me

Anonymous Celtic Prayer

Encircle me
Enfold me
Entrance me
With Thy peace
That I may pray and love Thee still.

Encircle me
Embolden me
Enhance me
With Thy power
That I may ever do Thy will.

I Am Resting in God

Ammie Gronert

I am resting in God. I am receiving God's comfort
like a warm blanket that wraps around me.
I am resting in God feeling hope, light, and love.
I am resting in God, knowing that God's promises are
true and right,
even though there is confusion and fear,
sorrow and grief.
I am resting in God.

I am called by God the Spirit to grow and search,
to know that things in life change.
I am being called to what is true and good,
what is beautiful.
I am being called to trust, to live in faith
although my faith feels small and
at times you, God, seem far away.
I am being called by the Spirit now in my life.

Creator God, I am called into new life.
Help me be aware of your doing a new thing
not only in my life but also in the world.
Help me to know that your creating is here today.
Spirit, who brings wonder and awe,
restore my joy in you and in life.
Help me to be open to change and to what you bring.

Ammie Gronert is a spiritual director affiliated with Sacred Ground in St. Paul, Minnesota.

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